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Greenwood, Arthur

Richard Oastler,
"the factory king."

Hudersfield [Eng.]

1913

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MASTER NEGATIVE #

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ORIGINAL MATERIAL AS FILMED - EXISTING BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORD

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 5  100 1   Greenwood, Arthur, d 1880-
 6  245 10  Richard Oastler, "the factory king."
 7  250     2d ed.
 8  260     Hudersfield [Eng.] b Huddersfield Branch of the Workers'
Educational Association, c 1913.
 9  300     26 p. c 22 cm.
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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm **REDUCTION RATIO:** 9:1 **IMAGE PLACEMENT:** IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 9-30-97 **INITIALS:** AP

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Richard Oastler

"The Factory King."

[1789—1861.]

RICHARD OASTLER, the Factory Reformer, was born in St. Peter's Square, Leeds, and spent over thirty years of his life in the town, during which period he became closely identified with several philanthropic movements of the time. It was in 1830 that he first heard from the lips of Mr. Wood, a Bradford manufacturer, of the terrible conditions under which factory children worked, and the long hours they were kept at their employment. With characteristic vigour, he wrote a long letter to the "Leeds Mercury," which inaugurated a great campaign on behalf of the factory workers. In the following year, in a letter to the "Leeds Intelligencer," he laid down a policy for the working classes, and about the same time entered into what became known as the "Fixby Compact" with the representatives of the workmen of Huddersfield, whereby he and they, without sacrificing religious or political beliefs, agreed to work together to improve the lot of the factory operatives.

In both Lancashire and Yorkshire he addressed large meetings in favour of the "Ten Hours' Bill," and encouraged the numerous "short time

committees," formed for the purpose of influencing legislation. Wherever he went he was received with unbounded enthusiasm. His journeyings were like a Royal progress, and the term "Factory King," flung at him in derision by his opponents, was applied to him by the working classes with affection and gratitude. "King" Richard's name became a household word, and his appearance in the manufacturing towns of the North was generally the occasion of processions and monster demonstrations.

Oastler was a fluent and vigorous speaker, full of earnestness on behalf of the factory children, for whom he forcibly appealed at the same time, that he delivered himself of burning denunciations of the exploiters of child labour. As he became more and more immersed in his great campaign, his language became more unmeasured in its terms, and his enthusiasm greater.

Richard Oastler was keenly opposed to "The New Poor Law" of 1834, and when it was proposed to put the Act into operation at Fixby, his objections—made with his usual earnestness and vigour—led to his dismissal from the post of Steward at Fixby Hall, which he left considerably in debt, owing to his generous hospitality and the expenditure incurred in administering the Estate, on an inadequate salary. As a result he was sued for the amount and a verdict was returned against him, though it was made quite clear that no reflection was cast upon his personal character. Being unable to pay, he was committed to the debtors' prison—"The Fleet"—where he remained three years, during which time he edited and published a weekly, under the title of "The Fleet Papers," thus continuing his work on behalf of the Ten Hours' Movement. He was released in 1844, as a result of a public subscription list, which liquidated the debt, and his entry into Huddersfield on February 20th of that year was, one may imagine, such a day as Huddersfield had never seen before, eclipsing even the royal farewell given him when he left Fixby in 1838.

From this time onward until 1847, when Lord Ashley's Act was passed, he flung himself into the work of agitation, though his physical energy had become somewhat impaired. With the passage of Lord Ashley's Act his public career practically came to an end. During his declining years—which were chiefly spent at Guildford, in Surrey—he lived in retirement, occupying himself between 1851 and 1855 with the publication of a paper called "The Home"—in which are to be found many reminiscences of his campaigning days. He died at Harrogate in 1861, and his body lies in Kirkstall Churchyard, Leeds.

He was a very voluminous writer, and many of his pamphlets on the factory workers are characterised by burning indignation, and such thorough denunciation as one rarely sees at the present time. With Michael Thomas Sadler, John Fielden, Parson Bull, and others, he stands as one of a band of humanitarians who did much to overthrow the sterile and inhuman *laissez-faire* policy of the Early Victorian era.

There is a stained-glass window to the memory of Richard Oastler and his wife in St. Stephen's Church, Kirkstall, Leeds, placed there by their adopted daughter, the late Miss A. M. Tatham; while at Bradford there is a statue of him, which was unveiled

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by Lord Shaftesbury in 1869. In Woodhouse Churchyard, Huddersfield, there stands a monument bearing an inscription indicating the high regard in which Oastler was held. During his lifetime, and afterwards, there was no man in the length and breadth of England who was regarded so deeply by the working classes. A new generation has arisen, which knows not his name, though they have benefitted by his work.

Richard Oastler was not a great thinker; he was not a statesman; but he certainly was a great agitator; who ungrudgingly gave the best that was in him to the service of the downtrodden and helpless factory children who needed protection.

Leeds possesses no public memorial of Oastler, and a Leeds Oastler Committee has been formed to devise means whereby Oastler's name and work shall be perpetuated in the city of his birth.

The Committee suggests the following methods:—

(1) The Erection of a Tablet in the Parish Church, Leeds, which is in the vicinity of Oastler's birthplace, St. Peter's Square.

(2) The Presentation of a Portrait of Oastler to the Leeds City Art Gallery.

(3) The Erection of a Tablet at Kirkstall Church.

(4) The Establishment of an Oastler Annual Prize Essay Competition.

Donations towards the above objects are earnestly desired, and may be sent to the Hon. Treasurer, Mr. J. R. Bell, 16, Cranbrook Avenue, Beeston Hill, Leeds.

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TITLE